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ABSTRACT

One way to help basic writers become more effective writers is to encourage them to consider and write about what they do in writing--the problems they face and the satisfactions they glean. Using a scheme that involves using a hierarchy of stages of abstraction in discourse, students can be led to development of their writing skills. One such hierarchy goes from the lowest level of recording what is happening at present, through the intermediate level of reporting or narrating what happened in the past, to the higher levels of generalizing about what happens and theorizing about what will or may happen. The students' job over the semester would be to reinvent their own systems of abstraction about writing and their own language for the activities they engaged in when they assumed the role of writer. (TJ)

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Session D-14
Basic Writing Skills for
Adult Learners

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Respecting the Learner's Expertise: Assignments That Ask Students to Write about Composing

For the past three years, I have taught, in the University of Pittsburgh's evening division, a Basic Writing course that enables adult learners to conduct their own inquiries into the activity of writing. The course requires Basic Writing students to become, in effect, independent researchers on the subjects of what they as writers do, the problems they face, the satisfactions they glean from writing, so that they may gain control over their own writing by gaining a more realistic notion of what they and their classmates do when they compose and so that at the same time they may become more skillful in moving in their own writing among levels of abstraction: from reporting to generalizing, from generalizing to theorizing, and back again.

Before I explain in more detail the characteristics of the Basic Writing students in Pitt's program and the nature of the course as I teach it, let me provide some insight into the origin of this approach. For the germs of the idea of having students write about writing, I am indebted to two colleagues at Pitt, David Bartholomae and Elizabeth Goldstein, the first of whom provided a theoretical impetus and the second of whom provided a glimpse of the approach in practice.

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Bartholomae, in a paper entitled "Teaching Ourselves to Teach Basic Writing,"[1] argues that some of the great handicaps that Basic Writers face are their own notions of what the activity of writing involves, their "misleading and often damaging notions of who they must be and what they must do in order to write" (p. 20). He notes that "students like to believe that ideas happen to some people, special people, but certainly not to them, at least not until they get to be juniors or seniors, or until they look them up in books. . . . And they like to believe that writing itself is something that happens to a writer, not something a writer does, and it happens when something called inspiration overwhelms the chosen ones as they sit waiting, passively" (p. 12). Our students' difficulty in imagining themselves as writers, according to Bartholomae, "is not so much that they don't know 'how to write' but that they don't know about writing" (p. 19). They don't recognize that highly structured, finished "good writing" usually has its origins in private ramblings, tentative jottings, and intuitions of possible relationships like those that characterize their own first writing. They assume that "good writers'" fundamental distinction is that they produce "good writing" from the very beginning and simply "polish" it later; they believe that they themselves, because they are not "good writers," are doomed to settle for, at best, rehabilitated versions of the ideas they started out with, the language they first wrote down. Bartholomae's recommendation is that Basic Writing teachers counteract such notions about writing by "getting students to talk about what they do when they write" (p. 12) and by discussing with them

what we ourselves do and what we know other writers do.

Shortly before Bartholomae's article appeared, I had the opportunity to tutor some of Elizabeth Goldstein's students in Pitt's writing laboratory. Goldstein's students began their course by composing several "how I write" papers. I discovered, as I tutored them, not only that the students felt a sense of their own authority in writing about this subject but also that the tutoring sessions on these papers often turned into explorations of the writer's beliefs about the writing process, just as tutoring sessions on history papers often explored the writer's beliefs about the causes of a war or the results of a treaty. In short, the writing-about-writing assignments seemed to generate the kind of discussion about what writers do that Bartholomae had suggested we foster in Basic Writing classes. Moreover, digressions into subject matter that made teachers justifiably uneasy when writing classes discussed papers on abortion or the energy crisis brought these students round again to central concerns of a writing course: what writers do, and how we can talk about it.

The possibility of having Basic Writing students not only discuss what writers do but also write about it regularly, not just as the opening of a course, thus seemed an idea worth trying out. The difficult problem would be in sequencing assignments in a way that would constitute a course, a way of getting from a beginning to a middle to an end, and not simply touring the facets of writing as if they were points on a Greyline excursion. Basic Writers needed a way of moving themselves from where they were as writers to something better,

something that would enable them to gain control of the selves they created on paper in an academic setting, a setting that was often, for adults who had been away from school for some years, unfamiliar and intimidating. The course needed an organizing principle.

For that principle I turned to James Moffett's discussions of abstraction. In Teaching the Universe of Discourse, Moffett outlines a hierarchy of stages of abstraction in discourse, from the lowest level, recording of "what is happening" at present, through the intermediate level of reporting or narrating "what happened," to the higher levels of generalizing about "what happens" and, finally, theorizing or arguing "what will or may happen."[2] Moffett suggests that a reasonable way of organizing a curriculum "would be to have it recapitulate, in successive assignments, the abstractive stages across which all of us all the time symbolize raw phenomena and manipulate these symbolizations." He adds that "not only do we grow slowly through the whole abstractive range during our period of maturation, but at any time of life we are constantly processing new experience up through the cycle of sensations, memories, generalizations and theories" (p. 25).

Because my students in the evening division were adults, I was not so much concerned with the developmental implications of Moffett's scheme as I was with his suggestion that at every stage of life we are involved in reorganizing our abstracted universe, in processing experience up through the levels from sensation to memory to generalization to theory and then, reciprocally, in adjusting and sorting perceptions according to

generalizations and theories we have invented. Perhaps what the Basic Writers I would be teaching needed in order to rid themselves of their misleading and damaging notions about writing was a reworking of the abstracting they had done about it, the generalizations and theories they had constructed for themselves about writing; and perhaps this could be accomplished by means of a series of assignments that asked them, first, to observe and report on themselves as writers, then, to generalize about themselves as writers, and finally, to theorize about what the activity of writing involved for themselves and their classmates.

Such a format fitted into Pitt's expectations for the work to be done by Basic Writing students. A study conducted on Pitt's Basic Writing students found that the most common feature of their writing, in addition to error and lack of coherence, was an absence of generalization, an apparent inability on their part to go beyond recounting specific examples and illustrations to drawing conclusions based on them.[3] Given, for instance, an assignment to "discuss a time when you were creative and then go on to explain, on the basis of the incident you have described, what creativity means," Basic Writing students would make their way more or less successfully through the discussion of a specific incident, then would fail miserably to deal with the question of what creativity meant. Their papers would either end before any such discussion had begun, or they would settle lamely into one-line generalizations like "creativity is something we all possess" or "being creative is its own reward." One of the requirements for passing Basic Writing, therefore, was that

students demonstrate an ability to carry on a general discussion, more than a single sentence in length, based on a specific incident they had described. Generalizing about themselves as writers would give students experience in this skill.

I began, then, to design a sequence of assignments that would give students an opportunity to begin with what they were best at doing--describing specific incidents--and then to work changes on those papers at various levels of abstraction. Excluding two breaks in the sequence (one at midterm, one late in the semester) for practice finals, the papers would all be about composing itself--its processes, its satisfactions, its problems--and responsibility for identifying and analyzing each of these things would fall primarily on the students in the course, not the teacher. The students' job over the semester would be to re-invent their own systems of abstraction about writing, their own language for the activities they engaged in when they assumed the role of writer.

The first five assignments in the semester focused students' attention on what happened when they wrote. We thus began one step up Moffett's abstractive ladder, at the level of reporting or narrating. In each of the first assignments students were asked to describe, in detail, what had happened on a specific occasion when they wrote: the circumstances that had led them to write, the goals they had had, the stages they and their papers had gone through.

Assignment 1 began by reminding students that as people who "must regularly prepare reports, essays, and papers" they had a right to consider themselves writers. Then the assignment asked

them to choose one writing experience from their personal, vocational, or academic lives to describe. The end of the assignment invited students to generalize from what they had described by drawing some conclusions about themselves as writers, based on the incidents they'd written about in their papers. Students were given with this assignment a list of questions to help them generate material for their papers. They were asked, for instance, to recall the non-writing aspects of their writing experience: what they did when they weren't actually putting pen to paper. They were asked to consider what their experience had been <u>like</u>: what experiences other than writing they could say it resembled. They were asked to say what they had been trying to accomplish as they wrote.

When I marked these first papers, my concern was with eliciting detail in the descriptions and with raising questions in the students' minds about what writing involves. I wanted to encourage students to examine the language in which they had chosen to narrate their experiences, and to question the possible disparity between the simple, textbook-like formulations they were likely to fall back on to describe their writing and the complex experience they had had when they'd written. When a student stated, for instance, that she had done research for a report to her employer and then had put her ideas into "informative paragraphs," I would try in my comments to uncover some of the hidden issues in such a statement. I would write in the margin, "How did you do that? What exactly did you say to yourself as you were composing the paragraphs? How did you decide when they were 'informative' enough?" When a student said he had

"considered several topics" for a history paper and had "finally picked the Panama Canal," I would ask him, in the margin, what had led him to decide that this topic would be better than the others he had considered. I would try, in other words, to get students to recognize that they had a good deal they could say about their experience as writers and that there was some point in searching beyond the first phrases that occurred to them to describe it.

The next two assignments asked students to narrate two other writing experiences: the first, a time when they had written something that satisfied them, something they were glad even now they had written; the second, a time when they had found writing particularly difficult. In these assignments, once again, students were invited to go beyond narration to generalization: in the first, they were asked to draw some conclusions about what made writing satisfying to them; in the second, they were asked to give a name to the greatest difficulty they had experienced as writers and to explain why they thought it was the hardest thing about writing for them.

When I marked these papers, I used two strategies. In reading each of the papers written for the satisfaction assignment, I looked for a section in which the writer had given a thin, undetailed account of the actual composing of the satisfying piece of writing; students seemed eager to explain the circumstances that led up to this writing and the after-effects of it, but on the subject of what they had actually done when they composed, they were often nearly silent, settling for statements like "I sat down at my table and the words just flowed

from my pen." In class, we would examine together some papers that followed such a pattern and then I would ask students to account for the fact that the papers said so little about the actual process of writing. Characteristically, someone would answer that "there really isn't much you can say about writing." I would ask students, then, what sorts of subjects people had much they could say about; and the answer would usually be "subjects they're interested in" or "subjects they know well or study a lot." I would point out then that what they were suggesting was that the amount one could say about a subject was not so much a function of the subject as it was a function of the writer's involvement in the subject. I would tell them then that their assignment for next week would require them to become involved students of their own writing: to get to know their own experience as writers well enough to revise that section of their papers so that it would show readers something more about what writers do. Their fourth assignment, then, would be to revise the paper written for Assignment 2, expanding on the narration of the incident.

My strategy in marking the papers about students' difficulties with writing also led to an assignment to revise. With these papers, however, I began to focus attention away from the narrative and toward the generalizations. In reviewing the papers students had written for Assignment 3, I would look in particular at the sections where each student gave a name to his or her writing difficulty and explained what made it such a problem. I would then have students rewrite that section so that it expressed a new idea, so that it enabled them to learn something

new about themselves and writing. After they had revised the paper, I asked them to come to class prepared to say what revising their conclusions in this way had taught them, what they could say now about their writing problems that they couldn't have said before they wrote the final version of the paper. My purpose here was to enable students to realize, through first-hand experience, that acts of naming and renaming could be seen as acts of learning and that their own choices of names for the parts of their writing experiences, the names they gave to what they were doing, might affect the outcome of their efforts as writers. We talked, for instance, about the differences between naming one's writing problem "bad grammar" and naming it "worry about grammar"; we talked about the different programs of response one might have to problems named "lack of time," "lack of interest" and "lack of planning." I hoped, of course, that students would recognize that ways of addressing their problems as writers fell within their own control, that they might be assertive rather than passive learners. But more importantly, I wanted to draw their attention to the fact that the revision of language could be made into more than a "polishing" process: that the search for new words involved one in a search among new thoughts, among statements about reality, ant that in making such choices one created one's possibilities.

When students had written their final versions of the satisfaction and difficulty papers, I copied them for the whole class and stapled them together into two sets of packets, one containing all of the class's papers about the times writing was satisfying, the other containing all the papers about writers' difficulties. Each student received copies of these

two packets to use as raw data for the next essays he or she would write: essays that required the students to begin to work primarily on the levels of generalization and theory. In these assignments I asked students to identify trends in the packets of papers and, on the basis of the trends they had discovered, to construct theories about the satisfactions of writing and the problems that Basic Writers faced. Because in these assignments, cut off from the comfortable tasks of narrating personal experiences, students often floundered, we spent a good deal of time in class talking over what they were being asked to do. We discussed the differences one would expect to find in pieces of writing that explained theories and pieces of writing that narrated experiences. We discussed ways of structuring the former kinds of papers so that readers could understand what was going on in them and what they might expect from them. We discussed the role that individual narrative papers from the packet might play as sources of evidence and illustration in the theory papers. And we spent several class hours evaluating students' rough drafts for these assignments, identifying strengths and weak spots and digressions, suggesting ways that writers might go about revising. The final two assignments in the sequence, then, required students to revise the drafts of their theory papers into finished reports suitable for presentation to academic readers. For the remainder of the course, the assignments dropped back to lower abstraction levels, preparing students for their final exam by asking them once again to narrate incidents and base generalizations on them.

The principal "basic writing skill" that such a sequence of assignments about writing teaches the adult learners is thus abstraction: abstraction of statements about themselves as writers from narratives of their writing experiences, and abstraction of theories about Basic Writers as a group from the statements of individual Basic Writers. I cannot claim, of course, that the abstractions in the studies conducted by these student writers approach in subtlety and complexity the abstractions found in professional research about writers and writing. But the shuttling from particular to general, from evidence to conclusions based on it, is similar enough to offer students insight into the peculiarities of academic discourse. That this discourse, for a term, has been about themselves and their experience as writers, and that it has grown, in their own hands, from narrative to generalization to theory, creates an additional legitimacy for these adult learners in their entry into the academic world. They have begun to do what academics do, to manipulate statements in the ways that academics manipulate them. They have been involved in making ideas, not simply waiting for them to happen. They have had a chance to see that understanding of a subject like writing is not so much something one acquires (or should have acquired years ago in high school) as it is something one has the power to create.

Notes

[1] David Bartholomae, "Teaching Ourselves to Teach Basic Writing," PCTE Bulletin (April 1977), pp. 9-21. Subsequent references to this article will be given in the text.

[2] James Moffett, Teaching the Universe of Discourse (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), p. 47. Subsequent references will be given in the text.

[3] This study is discussed in David Bartholomae's "Teaching Basic Writing: An Alternative to Basic Skills," Journal of Basic Writing, 2, No. 2 (1979), 106-7.